

Planning a Syllabus

Try thinking of major assignments in terms of building blocks, each two to four weeks in length. Select assignments with an eye toward covering a fairly wide range of contexts and strategies, where each unit becomes gradually more complex (and builds off the preceding unit).

Compared to some other approaches to writing instruction, the process approach may tend to move more slowly--but it also goes into greater depth. Instead of a 500-word essay every week, process composition teachers expect papers from 1000-2000 words, developed through at least two full drafts (rough and "final") over two to four weeks. As a result, it might help to think in terms of two, three, or four week patterns as you consider the pace of the class.

If you choose to run small, outside-of-class conference groups, you need to factor those in as you plan your syllabus. For instance, during any 2-4 week sequence, I dedicate at least one week to the conferences. During this week, students meet in class on Monday or Tuesday, exchange photocopies of their rough drafts, and then I cancel class for the rest of the week. Instead of class, the students must come to one revision conference meeting with their group. Groups consist of 4-5 students and me. We meet for 45-60 minutes, usually at some place away from the classroom (like the Lair). During the conference, we discuss each group member's paper. At the end of each meeting, students return to each other the (now annotated) copies of their rough drafts. Students revise these drafts and hand them in (usually at the next regular class meeting).

I sometimes hold prewriting or topic conferences (e.g., to help them narrow and focus their research topic). These can be either individual or group conferences.

Begin

To begin organizing a syllabus, work backwards off the official academic calendar. Divide the total number of weeks (or class periods) into units or chunks based on the main writing projects you've selected. Each unit begins with some sort of introductory presentation and activity and ends on the paper's due date. In between, insert activities and assignments relevant to the stages of the writing that the students will be learning and practicing. Conferences typically take one week. Another might be devoted to brainstorming and heuristics, leading up to work on finding organizational patterns in the raw material the students have gathered. Other, more general, sessions might include : analyzing audiences, discovering purposes, finding alternative methods for structuring and organizing papers, discussing the style of different sorts of texts, reviewing editing techniques, etc.

Organize

You might find the following patterns useful ways of thinking about the assignment units and how they combine and build off one another to organize a syllabus:

TWO WEEK PATTERN

Usually for short papers (2-4 page) that don't require sophisticated, extended analysis.

- Week 1: Topic selection and development; drafting
- Week 2: Group conferences

THREE WEEK PATTERN

Usually for medium papers (4-6 pages) requiring more attention to analysis and integration of sources.

- Week 1: Topic selection and development
- Week 2: In-depth analysis of sources, organization, drafting
- Week 3: Group conferences

FOUR WEEK PATTERN

For large, complex papers (6-10 pages) or collaborative writing.

- Week 1: Problem-definition, brainstorming, research
- Week 2: Prewriting conference: discussion of sources, further questions, directions for focus and development
- Week 3: In depth analysis of sources, organization, drafting * Week 4: Group conferences